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ABSTRACT

In some classrooms, student voices are barely heard while teachers monopolize classroom talk, and knowledge is treated as residing entirely with the teacher. This Digest explores different ways in which student voices can be heard in the classroom. Negotiating a curriculum is one means through which students share authority in the classroom. Negotiation promotes student engagement, exploration, and reflection and helps teachers meet students where they are. Specific pedagogies acknowledging the importance of student voice have developed within particular disciplines. One of the most well-known is the writing process approach to teaching writing. Students' cultural identities are also crucial dimensions of student voice. For students who belong to subordinated groups, honoring their voice within the classroom assumes special significance. Building on what students know is a key component of culturally relevant teaching. Ultimately, the question for teachers is not simply how to incorporate student voices into classroom activities, but how to assist in the growth of those voices. This can entail using specific teaching methods as well as creating situations in which students express their voices beyond the classroom. (Contains 22 references.) (SM)

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Incorporating Student Voice into Teaching Practice

John Kordalewski

In much of the current discourse on school improvement, great importance is attached to standards set for schools and statewide testing to measure how those standards are being met. In this context, ideas about classroom activity often center around prescribed student performance objectives that are to be reached (Payzant, 1999). A divergent strain of thinking, however, persists among many educators, who emphasize the role of student voice in the teaching and learning process.

In some classrooms, student voices are barely heard; the teacher monopolizes classroom talk, and knowledge is treated as residing entirely with the teacher. This is what Paulo Freire (1970) terms "banking" education (teachers "deposit" knowledge into students' heads) and describes as the antithesis of teacher-student *dialogue*. A range of approaches to teaching highlight the importance of dialogue. Some of these approaches focus on classroom processes, while others are especially concerned with how students' cultural identities help to constitute their voices. This digest explores different ways in which student voices can be heard in a classroom.

Negotiating the Curriculum

Giving students a voice entails more than asking them for periodic comments or feedback during a lecture (Onore, 1992) - although those measures can break up teacher monologue and enhance communication. When students have a voice in classroom processes, they share in decision-making and the construction of knowledge. The teacher, consequently, becomes a co-learner and facilitator as well as a source of knowledge.

"Negotiating curriculum" is a means through which students share authority in the classroom. This can be a structured procedure. Boomer (1992), for instance, outlines a method in which at the beginning of each unit, teachers and students ascertain what students already know about the topic, what they want to find out, how they will find it out, and how they will assess their accomplishments. Shor (1996), similarly, begins a course by devising the syllabus in collaboration with the students, and invites student critique of course activities and content as the semester proceeds. Curriculum can also be negotiated when students have input as to how they will proceed in particular activities. This may entail their choosing topics, sources, and media for individual and group projects (Davenport et al., 1995; Mercado, 1993; Walsh, 1991). It may entail teachers' allowing class discussions to follow emergent student questions (Dilg, 1999; Levin, 1998) and/or planning future activities that address those questions.

Such practices are extolled both for their modeling of democracy and for their value in helping students learn course content and skills. Onore (1992) points out that the negotiation process promotes student engagement, exploration, and reflection, all of which are key ingredients to the maximization of learning. Shor (1996) writes of students coming to occupy the "enabling center of their educations, not the disabling margins" (p. 200). Negotiation also helps teachers meet students where students are and thereby foster learning that builds from students' existing knowledge and ideas.

Student Voice in Specific Disciplines

Specific pedagogies acknowledging the importance of student voice have developed within particular disciplines. One of the most well-known is the "writing process" approach to teaching writing (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986). This approach, as framed by many of its exponents, encourages the emergence of a written form of student voice: student writers' expression of ideas that matter to them, and their use of language and style that convey their engagement. Writing process classrooms are likely to feature a degree of decentralized control, as student writers make a range of "ownership decisions" (Rosaen, 1993) - choosing topics, purpose, forms, audience, and time frames for completion - and provide input to one another.

Gabella (1994) discusses the importance of student voice in history classrooms. She notes that experienced historians see knowledge as residing in "the ongoing conversation among a community of inquirers," rather than in a textbook or teacher (p. 351). For students to learn history according to this principle, they need classrooms where they have "ample opportunity to practice the roles of learner and inquirer, the namer of significance, rather than only receiver of knowledge" (p. 352). Certain kinds of activities - dramatic reenactments, projects, group work, examination of primary source documents and works of art - provide such opportunities. When students exercise their voices in such contexts, they practice and develop a range of advanced thinking skills.

Multicultural Education

The above discussion suggests ways of deepening students' involvement in the learning process and furthering their development as writers, historians, and students in general. It does so without reference to students' cultural identities. Some observers, however, point to those identities as crucial dimensions of students' voices. To these observers, voice is not a phenomenon located entirely within the individual. Rather, an individual's voice reflects and interacts with community voices. It also reflects one's socially-constituted life experiences. Walsh (1991) defines "voice" as "words, narratives, discourses, and stances that help express the dynamics of social experience and help shape and position the subjective understanding of this experience within consciousness" (p. viii).

For students who belong to subordinated groups, the honoring of voice in this

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sense assumes special significance. When students' community voices are underrepresented or devalued in the curriculum, students may feel silenced in classroom activities. By contrast, a curriculum that presents students' cultures in a positive light invites students' participation (Sheets, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Similarly, lessons in which students' everyday experiences are recognized as sources of knowledge promote the exercise of student voices - and the academic learning that can result from active engagement.

In classrooms that honor student voices in such ways, languages other than Standard English appear as a resource for learning. Walsh (1991) and Sheets (1995) describe instances in which Spanish-speaking students' use of their native language enabled them to perform advanced academic tasks and assume "expert" roles in classroom interactions. Lee (1991) and Murrell (1993) describe how linguistic practices common among speakers of Black English Vernacular can function as scaffolds for children learning to read. Delpit (1998) and Walsh (1991) discuss how teachers can better assist student learning when they understand their students' uses of culture-specific modes of expression and meanings of words. This holds true when facility with Standard English is the goal of instruction.

Building on what students know, a principle that characterizes the approaches to curriculum negotiation and dialogic teaching discussed earlier, is also described by Ladson-Billings (1994) as a key component of "culturally relevant teaching." In a multicultural context, incorporating students' knowledge is likely to entail addressing certain relationships within and outside the classroom. It may mean, for the teacher, transcending one's own ignorance and biases about forms of knowledge that are not accorded high status in the dominant culture. It may mean dealing openly with student questions about race and other topics, about which some teachers are uncomfortable talking (Jervis, 1996; Dilg, 1999). Furthermore, it may mean providing space for students' critique of oppressive and discriminatory realities that they perceive and face (Hamovitch, 1996; Levin, 1998; Walsh, 1991), and assisting students' development of that critique.

Ultimately, the question for teachers is not simply how to incorporate student voices into classroom activities, but how to assist in the growth of those voices. This can entail, along with the kinds of teaching approaches discussed thus far, creating situations in which students express their voices beyond the classroom (Mercado, 1993; Torres-Guzman, 1992). Such situations can include projects in which students take social action around issues that concern them.

Conclusion

Acknowledging the importance of student voice in the classroom means acknowledging students' active role in the learning process. Teaching practices that engage student voices can enhance learning. In the current public education environment, they may have the added benefit of better equipping students to meet the standards that have been established by state test makers and others. They also may provide a source of challenge to the legitimacy of those standards.

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